Why do people become police officers: A study of reasons and their predictions of success



David Lester
Stockton University





Journal of Police Science and Administration

Volume 11, No. 2
Printed in U.S.A.

Why Do People Become Police Officers: A Study of Reasons and Their Predictions of Success

David Lester

David Lester is the chairman of the Department of Criminal Justice, Stockton State College, Pomona, NJ 08240. He holds B.A. and M.A. degress from Cambridge University, England, and the M.A. and Ph.D. from Brandeis University. Dr. Lester lectures at the state police training academy in New Jersey and has published extensively on suicidal behavior.

There has been a good deal of speculation about the reasons why people choose to become police officers. One predominant view is that some do so because of their desire to be law enforcers, while others become police officers primarily to be of service to people in the community (Cumming et al. 1965). However, little empirical research has been conducted on this issue. In a small study, Lester et al. (1980) found that, contrary to expectations, those who rated the desire to enforce laws as important for them in their desire to become police officers also highly rated the desire to be of service to people. The two motives were positively associated.

The present research was designed to explore the reasons for becoming a police officer by means of a simple questionnaire. Responses to this questionnaire by a sample of state police recruits in training were then examined to see if the responses predicted successful graduation from the training academy.

METHOD

A questionnaire listing 15 reasons for joining the police force (see table 1) was completed by 128 male police recruits in training at a state police training academy. For each reason, the recruit checked how important it was as a motive for joining the police force on a five-point scale, from 1 indicating unimportant to 5 indicating very important. Subjects were 97 white males, 18 black males, 9 Hispanic males, 3 American Indian males, and one Oriental male. Their mean age was 22.7 years (SD = 3.1). Sixty-eight male recruits also completed the Kuder Occupational Interest Survey, form DD (Kuder 1976); their mean age was 22.8 years (SD = 3.2).

The reasons given for joining by the 97 white males were compared with those given by the 31 minority males by means of a multivariate analysis of variance (using the package of computer programs SAS76). Ninety-four recruits graduated and 28 resigned or were dismissed. (An additional 6 did not graduate because of injury or illness.) These two groups were compared by means of a multivariate analysis of variance (using program SAS76).

RESULTS

The responses of the 128 recruits who completed the questionnaire were subjected to a factor-analysis using program BMDO3M of the BIOMED statistical package from UCLA. Three major and two minor factors were identified (see table 2).

Factor II has high loadings on job security, good pay, opportunities for advancement, and early retirement. The common theme was pay and security. Factor IV had high loadings on fighting crime, enforcing laws, and helping people in the community. The common theme was service. Factor I had high loadings on working on your own with autonomy, the prestige of the job, and its power and authority. The common theme was that of power and status.

In table 2, a high score indicates that the reason was important as a motive for joining the police force. Thus, the five most important reasons were, in order: helping others (reason 5), job security (reason 6), companionship with co-workers (reason 12), enforcing the laws (reason 10), and fighting crime (reason 7).

The reasons given for joining the police were not related to scores on the "police officer" scale of the Kuder Occupational Interest Survey (see table 2). Age was related to the reasons given for joining: older recruits rated early retirement with good pay (reason

TABLE 1

THE REASONS QUESTIONNAIRE

People give many reasons for why they became police officers. Below are listed some of the major reasons that police officers give. Please rate each reason for how large a part it played in your decision to become a police officer.

	Reasons	Unimportant		Somewhat Important		Very Important
1.	Opportunities for advancement	1	2	3	4	5
2.	Structured like the military	1	2	3	4	5
3.	Early retirement with good pay	1	2	3	4	5
4.	The excitement of the work	1	2	3	4	5
5.	It provides an opportunity to help people in the community	1	2	3	4	5
6.	Job security	1	2	3	4	5
7.	To fight crime	1	2	3	4	5
8.	The profession has prestige	1	2	3	4	5
9.	You work on your own a lot; have a good deal of autonomy	1	2	3	4	5
10.	To enforce the laws of the society	1	2	3	4	5
11.	The job pays well	1	2	3	4	5
12.	Good companionship with your co-workers	1	2	3	4	5
13.	Because you had friends/relatives who were police officers	1	2	3	4	5
14.	The job carries power and authority	1	2	3	4	5
15.	There was a lack of other job alternatives	1	2	3	4	5

3), job security (reason 6), the job pays well (reason 11), and there was a lack of other job alternatives (reason 15) as more important and the excitement of the work (reason 4) and it provides an opportunity to help people in the community (reason 5) as less important (see table 2).[1]

The reasons given by the white males in the sample and those given by minority recruits differed significantly on a multivariate analysis of variance (see table 3; $F(15,112) = 2.76$, $p = 0.001$). The white males rated the military structure as less important, job security as less important, and having friends and relatives who were police officers as more important.

A comparison of those males who graduated with those who resigned or were dismissed showed that the reasons given for joining only barely differentiated the two groups (see table 3; $F(15,106) = 1.70$, $p = 0.06$). The only reason that was significantly different for the two groups was that those who graduated rated having friends and relatives who were police officers as more important.

In order to carry out further analyses on the data, three subscales of reasons were formed on the basis of the results of the factor analysis: pay security (reasons 1, 3, 6, and 11); service (reasons 5, 7, and 10); and power and status (reasons 8, 9, and 14). The groups were then compared for their scores on these three subscales. Those graduating and those resigning/dismissed did not differ on any of the three subscales (see table 3), and neither did the white males and the nonwhite males.

[1]A replication sample of 111 male state police recruits was tested (mean age 23.4 years; standard deviation = 3.0 years). The factor analysis produced similar factors: reasons 8 and 9 constituting a power and status factor; reasons 1, 3, and 6 a pay and security factor; and reasons 4, 5, 7, and 10 a service factor. In this replication sample, age did not correlate significantly with any reason. The more educated police officers were less attracted by the military structure, the good pay, and the opportunity to enforce the law.

TABLE 2

FACTOR ANALYSIS OF REASONS BASED ON 128 MALE STATE POLICE RECRUITS

Reasons	Factor I	II	III	IV	V	Mean Score	Pearson Correlation With Age	Kuder Police Officer Scale Score (n = 63 only)
1. Opportunities for advancement	22	57*	20	−07	24	4.1	0.15	0.05
2. Structured like the military	19	03	72*	08	10	2.9	−0.11	0.10
3. Early retirement with good pay	−05	78*	14	−02	17	3.4	0.23**	−0.02
4. The excitement of the work	34	07	03	25	45	3.9	−0.18***	0.14
5. It provides an opportunity to help people in the community	02	−06	−07	68*	44	4.5	−0.19***	0.03
6. Job security	21	77*	−03	13	−21	4.3	0.21***	−0.06
7. To fight crime	13	11	10	81*	−02	4.2	−0.02	0.01
8. The profession has prestige	59*	25	−04	22	07	4.1	−0.04	−0.04
9. You work on your own a lot; have a good deal of autonomy	56*	08	15	14	18	3.3	0.04	−0.10
10. To enforce the laws of society	17	−01	21	79*	−19	4.2	−0.06	−0.13
11. The job pays well	09	74*	−23	05	−19	3.5	0.23**	−0.18
12. Good companionship with your co-workers	44	−09	44	03	05	4.3	0.09	−0.19
13. Because you have friends/relatives who were police officers	37	−08	−70*	−16	05	2.0	0.09	0.09
14. The job carries power and authority	76*	13	−09	01	−19	2.4	−0.05	0.01
15. There was a lack of other job alternatives	05	04	−08	10	−80*	1.3	0.28**	0.03
Scales: pay and security						15.3	0.28**	−0.07
service						12.9	−0.11	−0.04
power and status						9.9	−0.02	−0.07
	20%	33%	43%	51%	58%			

*Items with high loadings.
**Two-tailed p<0.01.
***Two-tailed p<0.05.

A replication sample was tested of 111 male state police recruits (see footnote 1), and the original and replication samples included 19 female state police recruits. These 19 females were compared with the 111 male recruits in the replication sample. A multivariate analysis of variance showed a significant overall difference between the males and the females (F (15,114) = 2.39, p = 0.005). The female recruits rated early retirement with good pay and the profession has prestige as less important, and an opportunity to help people in the community, fighting crime, and enforcing the laws of the society as more important. The females scored higher on the factor of service, lower on the factor of power and status, and no different on the factor of pay and security.

DISCUSSION

It proved possible to design a simple questionnaire to assess the reasons why police officers choose law enforcement as a career. Factor-analytic analyses of the responses from state police recruits identified three major clusters of reasons: pay and security, service, and power and status.

The most important reasons for becoming a police officer were concerned with pay and security and

TABLE 3

SCORES ON THE "REASONS" OF THOSE GRADUATING AND SPECIAL GROUPS OF MALE POLICE RECRUITS*

Reasons	Graduates (n=94)		Resigned/ Dismissed (n=28)			Whites (n=97)		Minorites (n=31)		
1	4.15	(0.82)	3.96	(0.84)	ns	4.12	(0.82)	4.13	(0.81)	ns
2	2.96	(1.13)	2.71	(1.08)	ns	2.78	(1.11)	3.39	(1.12)	p=0.01
3	3.29	(1.10)	3.54	(1.23)	ns	3.31	(1.11)	3.48	(1.26)	ns
4	3.88	(0.90)	3.96	(0.84)	ns	3.94	(0.86)	3.74	(0.96)	ns
5	4.43	(0.71)	4.57	(0.74)	ns	4.52	(0.65)	4.29	(0.86)	ns
6	4.19	(0.96)	4.50	(0.64)	ns	4.20	(0.95)	4.58	(0.62)	p=0.04
7	4.17	(0.80)	4.43	(0.69)	ns	4.26	(0.75)	4.23	(0.88)	ns
8	4.18	(1.01)	4.04	(0.92)	ns	4.19	(0.90)	4.03	(1.17)	ns
9	3.32	(1.07)	3.21	(1.20)	ns	3.37	(1.12)	3.26	(1.06)	ns
10	4.15	(0.79)	4.25	(0.70)	ns	4.15	(0.73)	4.29	(0.86)	ns
11	3.49	(0.99)	3.71	(0.81)	ns	3.45	(0.92)	3.81	(1.01)	ns
12	4.24	(0.81)	4.25	(0.84)	ns	4.26	(0.81)	4.26	(0.81)	ns
13	2.23	(1.24)	1.43	(0.69)	p=0.001	2.25	(1.15)	1.39	(0.99)	p<0.001
14	2.39	(0.95)	2.29	(0.94)	ns	2.32	(0.86)	2.65	(1.17)	ns
15	1.30	(0.64)	1.36	(0.73)	ns	1.29	(0.64)	1.45	(0.81)	ns
	Overall F (15.106) = 1.70. p=0.06					Overall F(15,112)=2.76, p=0.001				
<u>Scales</u>										
pay and security	15.12	(2.91)	15.71	(2.42)	ns	15.08	(2.80)	16.00	(2.77)	ns
service	12.74	(1.84)	13.25	(1.60)	ns	12.93	(1.61)	12.81	(2.27)	ns
power and status	9.89	(2.18)	9.54	(2.13)	ns	9.98	(2.07)	9.94	(2.49)	ns

*Mean scores are shown with standard deviations in parentheses.

service. "Helping others" and "enforcing the laws" were among the most highly rated reasons, and "job security" was also one of the top five reasons.

Minor racial differences were evident in the reasons given, with white males rating the military structure of the police and job security as less important, and having friends and relatives in the field as more important. Sex differences were very strong. Female recruits rated service as more important and rated power and status as less important.[2]

The reasons given proved to be of no relevance for the prediction of whether a recruit would complete the training program and graduate from the training academy. In earlier studies, personality test measures have also proved to be poor predictors of graduation (Lester et al. 1979), and only education has been shown to predict graduation, with the more educated recruits being more likely to graduate (Lester 1979).

[2]Studies carried out on samples of inexperienced and experienced state and municipal police officers indicated no consistent correlations between the reasons for becoming a police officer and variables such as job satisfaction, height and weight, age and years of work experience, a history of military service, attitudes toward capital punishment, thrill seeking, type A personality (the competitive, driven, tense personality found in those prone to heart attacks), department size, sources of stress, and number of children. Experienced and inexperienced municipal police officers did not differ significantly in their reasons for becoming police officers, and municipal and state police officers did not differ consistently in their reasons for becoming police officers.

REFERENCES

Cumming, E.; Cumming I.; and Edell, L. 1965. Policemen as philosopher, guide and friend. *Social Problems* 12:266-268.

Kuder, G. 1976. *The Kuder Occupational Interest Survey*. Chicago: Science Research Associates.

Lester, D. 1979. Predictors of graduation from a police training academy. *Psych. Reports* 44:362.

Lester, D.; Arcuri, A.; and Gunn, M. 1980. Police roles, discretion and danger. *Perceptual and Motor Skills* 51:318.

Lester, D. et al. 1979. The relevance of a personality test in decisions to hire police officers and their graduation from a training academy. *Police Studies* 2(3):24-26.